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ABSTRACT

A study investigates how asking-for-information interactions are managed in actual talk and how they are represented in textbooks for learners of English as a second language (ESL). Data are confined to opening and closing sequences in interactions, and are derived from 60 real-life and 60 textbook dialogue interactions. The real-life interactions took place at a university information desk and in calls to the Port Authority of New York for transportation information. Textbook interactions were intended for adult learners. Three features of the opening and closing sequences were examined: (1) average utterance length in turns and the percentage of the overall dialogue that is opening- or closing-related; (2) the number and percentage of politeness markers; and (3) one-part and two-part interactions for greetings and leavetakings. Analysis suggests that significant differences exist between real-life and textbook dialogue characteristics. In addition, important differences between telephone and face-to-face interactions in information requests were found, and, therefore, the reliability of telephone data for drawing conclusions about conversation in general is called into question. (MSE)

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Asking for Information: Opening and Closing Sequences in Real Life and Textbook Dialogues

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate how asking-for-information interactions are managed in actual talk and how such interactions are represented in textbooks for learners of English as a second language (ESL). The analysis reported on here is part of a larger study and is confined to two segments of the interactions: opening and closing sequences. The results suggest that, although the textbook dialogues mirror actual interactions with regard to certain features, they diverge from them in important and sometimes surprising ways.

Interest in analyzing longer stretches of discourse has increased over the last twenty years, yet only recently have researchers recognized the importance of comparing actual talk to textbook dialogues (DeWitt 1988; Holmes 1988; Bernsten and Scotton 1986; Thomas 1984). In making this comparison, however, none has looked into the relationship between face-to-face and telephone interactions. And it is important to discover whether teaching materials for second language learners accurately reflect the particularities of talk in various settings.

Opening and closing sequences have received considerable attention in the literature (Schegloff 1968; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Structurally, they are brief, and among the most ritualized sequences in interaction; and their availibility as objects of analysis has been exploited. Such sequences serve several functions in interaction: they frame the interaction.

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they enable participants to orient themselves to each other and to the task at hand, and they offer opportunities for ritualistic exchanges. In asking-for-information interactions, where interlocutors are presumably strangers, opening and closing sequences are shown to vary sytematically between face-to-face and telephone encounters. This report quantifies three basic features of these sequences: speaker turns, politeness markers, and adjacency pairs. For the purposes of this study, 'turn' is understood to denote a bit of speaker talk which is bounded on either side by a bit of talk by (an)other speaker(s). Thus, backchannel cues and other similar utterances are included as turns when they are motivated by prior turns. Following Schegloff, then, "a turn may contain anything from a single 'mm' (or less) to a string of complex sentences" (1968: 1076). Politeness markers are realized either as single words (e.g. please, kindly) embedded in a speaker turn or as potential two-part sequences (e.g. thank you/you're welcome). Adjacency pairs consist of two utterances produced successively by different speakers. The utterances are both ordered and related -- the first must belong to a class of first-pair parts (e.g. question, greeting) and be immediately followed by an appropriate second-pair part (e.g. answer, greeting). The first utterance predicts the occurrence of the second or, as Schegloff (1968) suggests, the second is "conditionally relevant" on the occurrence of the first. Results indicate that writers' representations of these sequences in ESL texts are varied, capturing actual patterns with respect to speaker turns and politeness markers, but not adjacency pairs.

The Study

Data Collection

The data for the study consist of 120 asking-for-information interactions; 60 of these are real-life (RL) and 60 are ESL textbook dialogues. RL interactions are from two settings: 30 took place at the main information desk on the campus of Columbia University and 30 occurred when callers asked Port Authority of New York operators for transportation information over the telephone. The face-to-face (FTF) exchanges were audiotaped and notes were taken during taping. A sign was placed alongside the tape recorder (both were in full view of all participants), stating that interactions were being taped for research on communication. Telephone interactions (TEL) were taped with the knowledge of the operator-employees as part of a periodic review procedure. Audiotaped interactions were transcribed using standard orthography and indicating intonation patterns at the end of each speaker turn.

All textbook dialogues are from ESL texts published in the United States since 1980 and designed for adults. Most, but not all, are conversation texts. Of these dialogues, 30 represent FTF interactions and involve someone asking for information in a context where information is normally dispersed. Thus, dialogues occurring in train stations, travel agencies, hotels, and at a variety of information booths, for instance, are included while those in which strangers interact on the street are not. Similarly, TEL dialogues included here are those in

which an information seeker calls an information giver with the intent of getting information. ESL dialogues were copied verbatim from the textbooks and notes were made concerning the surrounding text. Although many texts now have accompanying audio components, only the written representation of these dialogues is considered in this study.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the three features of opening and closing sequences under consideration in this report. Openings include all speaker turns from the beginning of the interaction up to and including the initial request for information and might include such turn types as greeting ('Good morning'), self-identification ('Operator 281'), and help question ('Can I help you?').

Table 1

OPENINGS

	RL(FTF)	ESL(FTF)	RL(TEL)	ESL(TEL)
av length in turns	2.07	1.47	2.63	1.97
% dialogue comprised of opening	9.49%	19.12%	6.82%	18.97%
# politeness markers	2	3	8	13
% dialogues w/pol mark	6.67%	10%	26.67%	43.33%
% 1-part greeting/dia	36.67%	16.67%	16.67%	43.33%
% 2-part greeting/dia	33.33%	0	6.67%	10%

Table 1 shows that opening sequences, which occurred in every interaction, consist of more speaker turns in RL(TEL) interactions than they do in RL(FtoF) encounters, a phenomenon

which is paralleled in the textbook dialogues. But although they consist of fewer turns, openings in ESL dialogues are proportionately more than twice as long as those in the RL data. In fact, nearly 20% of the average textbook dialogue is taken up by the opening sequence.

Not surprisingly, politeness markers in openings occur more often in the telephone data than they do in person. As can be seen, the occurrence of these markers is exaggerated in the ESL(TEL) dialogues.

Although one might hypothesize that politeness markers occur more often in telephone conversation, this is not the case for greeting exchanges (most often realized as 'Hi'/'Hi' in the data considered here). Goffman states that, unlike other reply/response sequences, greeting exchanges consist entirely of reactive responses and "enact an emotion that attests to the pleasure produced by the contact" (1981: 47). Greetings are not, however, always used in the four contexts considered in this study. That is, it is common for no greeting to occur at all, and when a greeting is present in a first-speaker turn, it is generally not realized in the turn of the next speaker. In other words, the two-part greeting adjacency pair is a marked or atypical form in these opening sequences. Not only is this pair underrepresented in the data considered here, but its occurrence as either a one-part or two-part feature is more common in RL(FTF) than in RL(TEL) interactions, and the reverse is seen in the textbook dialogues. In fact, in one context, ESL(FTF), there is not a single occurrence of a fully realized greeting pair.

Therefore, although openings in ESL textbook dialogues resemble those in RL interactions in number of speaker turns and use of politeness markers, they do not accurately reflect differences in the greeting exchange between face-to-face and telephone interactions.

Table 2

CLOSINGS

	RL(FTF)	ESL(FTF)	RL(TEL)	ESL(TEL)
av length in turns	1.9	.83	2.73	1.43
% dialogue comprised of closing	8.73%	10.87%	7.08%	13.82%
% dialogues w/pol mark (1st part)	50%	33.33%	10%	43.33%
% dialogues w/pol mark (1st & 2nd parts)	56.67%	16.67%	96.67%	43.33%
% 1-part leavetaking/dia	0	0	20%	10%
% 2-part leavetaking/dia	3.33%	0	30%	6.67%

Table 2 presents findings on sequences that terminate an interaction. While all the RL exchanges have closings, only 60% of the ESL(FTF) and 87% of ESL(TEL) dialogues contain such sequences. In spite of this, however, closings account for between 10% and 14% of the average textbook dialogue. Within the closing sequence, the frequency of two adjacency pairs, a politeness pair ('thank you/you're welcome') and a leavetaking pair ('bye bye/bye bye') is given in Table 2. The former is most often realized in the RL(TEL) data; in fact, all but one of these dialogues contain such a pair. Yet in the comparable textbook data the first-pair part occurs alone just as often as does the completed pair (43.33%). While the ratio of occurrence for both

single and paired politeness markers approximates 50% for RL(FTF) interactions, there are twice as many first-pair parts in ESL(FTF) dialogues as there are completed pairs. Here again is a mismatch of occurrence both between telephone and face-to-face interactions and between real- life and textbook dialogues.

Regarding leavetaking pairs, Table 2 documents the absence of such turn types in ESL(FTF) data and the minimal occurrence (3.3%) of the completed pair in similar RL exchanges. This adjacency pair does not typically occur in any of the contexts investigated, but when it does occur, it is most likely to do so in the RL(TEL) context -- a tendency which is mirrored to some extent in the ESL(TEL) dialogues.

To generalize from these findings, it is clear that neither the greeting nor leavetaking adjacency pairs typically occurs as such in the RL or ESL data on which this study is based. On the contrary, the politeness pair tends to occur as a two-part sequence in the closings of the RL data but not those in the textbook dialogues. This makes it difficult, then, to fault ESL dialogues for appearing overly polite and stilted when, in fact, the reverse seems to be the case, particularly in closing sequences.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that approximately 20% of the average ESL textbook dialogue contains an opening and 12% a closing. Thus, nearly a third of text dialogues are made up of a frame, leaving only 70% of the interaction for information exchange. Lacking in these sequences, however, is a

correspondence to real-life data concerning adjacency pair occurrence which is overrepresented in greeting exchanges in ESL(TEL) dialogues but underrepresented in all other contexts. (Noticeably absent in the texts are leavetaking pairs). Although they comprise fewer speaker turns on average than comparable RL openings and closings, these sequences are disproportionately weighty in the texts because the interactions are so brief (7.67 turns for FTF; 10.37 turns for TEL) compared to RL exchanges (21.77 for FTF; 38.6 for TEL). Therefore, ESL dialogues are less ritualized in opening and closing sequences than real-life interactions, but they make excessive use of these sequences at the expense of displaying other conversational features.

Further analysis suggests that within ESL dialogues the majority of initial requests for information are followed in the next speaker turn with a response to that request. Information exchange is typically achieved in ESL dialogues, then, through the occurrence of request/response adjacency pairs, either one per dialogue or a string of several two-part exchanges. Although these pairs are conspicuously absent in opening and closing sequences in text dialogues, they account for the bulk of information transmission in the rest of the interaction, a phenomenon which finds little support in the real world where embedding and negotiation are an integral part of interaction.

Finally, not only are there differences between real-life and textbook dialogues, but there are important differences between telephone and face-to-face conversation, at least in asking-for-information interactions. These differences, several

of which are reflected in comparable teaching materials, call into question the reliability of using telephone data to make statements about conversation in general.

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